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ABSTRACT

Two major problem areas exist in current high school forensics. The first is the decline in the number of debate participants in some parts of the country. Contributing to this decline are demands on extracurricular time and money, a lack of strong leadership as coaches leave academia, barriers to participation such as increased difficulty in preparation and increased time required for preparation, and, possibly, abusive debate practices. The second problem area is the decline in the quality of debate. This may be due in part to the increasing complexity of world issues. Other causes may be a lack of standards for debate handbooks and workshops, the competitive nature of contemporary debate that stresses what is successful rather than what is educationally sound, well-intended rules that do not live up to their promise, and the increase in theory arguments. Two possible solutions for these areas are (1) lowering the entry barriers by developing a classification system of three levels of competition, and (2) increasing judge intervention when an argument exceeds the bounds of accepted debate practice. (HTH)

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What must we do to Reach a Common Ground to Insure the Continued Survival of High School Debate?

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In the past few years there has been an increased emphasis on the quality of education at all levels and numerous studies have emphasized the need to modify and improve the quality of secondary education. In forensics, both the second National Developmental Conference on Forensics and this conference on the state of high school debate provide the opportunity to make significant improvements in the quality and visibility of high school forensics.

In examining the current state of high school forensics, I see two major areas of problems in debate. First, in some sections of the country there is a decline in the number of participants in debate. Some programs that were once active are now relatively inactive, and large squads are smaller.

The second, and perhaps more serious problem, is that the quality of debate (or at least some aspects of debate) has deteriorated over the past decade. This problem may be related to the first problem; as the quality of debate goes down, it becomes a less attractive alternative for potential debaters and coaches, and administive support is harder to justify.

While the level of participation is easy to measure, the quality of debate is harder to measure. In some ways, the quality of debate today is much better than debate, say, ten years ago. The quality of much (but not all) of the evidence used by debaters is higher; today it is common for debaters to cite law reviews, emperical studies, and so on, while in the past debaters often relied heavily on less sophisticated sources. The quality of some of the arguments advanced by debaters is also superior today than was the case with past debaters; witness the sophistication of arguments over studies and topicality. At the same time, there are some areas where the quality of debate has declined in the past few years.

The quality of delivery, for example, is clearly lower today than at anytime in the past. While criticisms of the delivery of

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1. Paper prepared for the National Forensic League Conference on the State of High School Debate, August, 1985.

2. See James H. McBath, ed. Forensics as Communication (Skokie: Illinois: National Textbook Company, 1975), pp. 24-25.

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debaters is hardly new,[2] the problem of incomprehensibility is a problem of serious concern to the vast majority of those in debate. Coaches and debaters alike complain about teams that win on junk arguments or incomprehensible positions. There is, however some disagreement about where to draw the line between acceptable and unacceptable delivery. While most would agree that debate should not become mere ellocution, there is still a need to make debaters speak in a more comprehensible manner.

The quality of the content of debate speeches is harder to measure. As mentioned earlier, in some ways the sophistication of arguments made by debaters has increased over the past decade. If there is an area that needs to be improved it may be the tendency of debaters to over-rely on conclusionary evidence.[3] Debaters often make arguments without understanding the reasoning behind the evidence cited to support their positions. In addition, all evidence introduced in a debate is often weighed equally; evidence from the National Enquirer is given the same weight as evidence from the Harvard Law Review. Finally, well developed arguments are often given the same (or less) credibility as a one-line card with a nuclear war impact; debaters and judges do not do well in evaluating the degree of confidence that a critic should have in a conclusion, based upon the evidence given to support the position. In short, debaters are reluctant to weigh evidence and to develop positions in a round.

Some Causes of Current Problems in Debate

Before addressing potential solutions to the current ills of debate, it might be desirable to examine what caused the current problems of debate:

Causes of the decline in participation. It is possible that part of the reason that participation in debate has declined is outside the control of the forensics community. The nature of the American high school student has changed over the past few years. Today's student is more likely to seek a part time job or to spend more time on studying as opposed to participating in an extracurricular activity. In addition, during the past recession, school systems were often forced to make cuts in their budgets, and debate programs were easy targets.

There are other reasons for declining participation in

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3. Walter Ulrich, "The Use and Misuse of Evidence in Debate." Debate Issues, 16 (January, 1983), pp. 10-16.

forensics. Successful debate programs require strong leadership, and potential debate coaches are increasingly tempted to leave academia for more profitable (and less stressful) occupations. As these individuals leave, they are replaced with less energetic individuals or with no individual at all. The result is that, one at a time, programs become inactive because qualified coaches are not available. Once the program becomes dormant, it is difficult to rebuild.

There are also increased barriers to participation in debate.[4] At one time, a debater that was bright could become competitive after spending a few weeks in the library. Consider the problems facing a debater today: they must be prepared to argue complex theoretical issues; to respond to state/study/world government/anarchy counterplans; sophisticated topicality positions; plan vagueness-type arguments; and be prepared to defend the value of economic growth, liberty (against rights malthus), or any other advantage they are foolish enough to defend. In addition, they might even be expected to know something about the topic being debated that year. Without back files, it is impossible to compete successfully at the national or regional level. Faced with the prospect of researching a huge number of generic positions, prospective debaters might easily be discouraged.

The extensive amount of time required to debate competitively may also discourage both debaters and coaches. To be a mediocre debater in some places requires the collection of thousands of pieces of evidence and a significant amount of time. Burnout becomes a common phenomenom as debaters see the season extended to over a year from the announcement of the topic to the final tournament. There is little time to do much besides debate; one topic is over in time to begin researching a new topic. Summers are spent attending summer debate workshops (or researching to get ready for the debate workshop).

Some may suggest that a part of the decline in participation is caused by abusive debate practices. While this may be a small factor in the decline in numbers, its importance should not be exagerated. If the problem with debate is the nature of the judges or the abusive practices, then the decline should be most apparent in the national tournaments where these abuses take place, while at local tournaments (or in those areas of the country without these undesirable elements) debate should be flourishing. This does not seem to be the case. National tournaments like Northwestern, Harvard, Emory, etc. are

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4. Craig W. Cutbirth, "Is Debate Becoming the New 'Sport of Kings?'" Debate Issues, 16 (February, 1983), 6-9.

remaining stable or growing, while it is the small tournaments that are declining in size and numbers.

Causes for decline in the quality of debate. The causes of the decline in the quality of debate are also unclear. Part of the problem may lie in the nature of society. My friend Tim Hynes of Louisville argues that part of the problems of debate reflect broader problems of society; it is a more complex world we live in today than the world we lived in a decade ago. Ten years ago debaters could not discuss issues of climactic change or the benefits of nuclear proliferation because these issues were rarely discussed in the literature.

Other causes of the problem are harder to isolate. It is tempting for individuals to look at other people to blame for the problems of contemporary debate. The potential targets are easy: handbooks, debate workshops, college debaters, unethical coaches, judges, etc. Before one reaches such a conclusion, I think it important to realize that, regardless of the source of the current problems of debate, they are not inflicted through maliciousness; individuals are not attempting to destroy debate through conscious effort. Rather, any harmful actions by individuals are byproducts of a desire by individuals to achieve other goals: trophies, fame, money, etc. If one assumes hostile motives to those that cause current practices, then any reform is doomed to failure, since there are numerous ways to harm the activity. If those that cause current problems do not have perverse motives, then by altering the reward structure is is possible to use these individuals to improve the quality of debate.

For example, many have pointed to the influence of college debate as a cause of some of the problems of high school debate. I have no doubt that some of this influence has been negative. At the same time, colleges can offer a great deal to high school programs. Future high school debate coaches must be trained by our colleges. College debate programs help get individuals interested in coaching debate and may provide needed judges and staff for local tournaments. Schools beginning new programs will often turn to the local colleges for help. Colleges can also provide strong advocates for local programs before state and local education boards. Workshops can help train both debaters and coaches who may otherwise be unfamiliar with both debate theory and topic-specific arguments. The question is not, should high schools and colleges work together, but rather what form that interaction should take. Rather than banning workshops or handbooks, it might be desirable to work on developing standards for these workshops, and to develop a system for evaluating the quality of the workshops. Workshops can play an important motivating and educational role for debaters.

Part of the problem with contemporary debate may stem from the competitive nature of the activity.[5] In the heat of competition, debaters and coaches may stress what is successful over what is educationally sound. This is especially clear at summer workshops, where there is a temptation for coaches to rely on practices that may produce victories at the institute tournament, but which may hurt the debaters when they return home. Abolishing institute tournaments might do something to reduce this pressure, although even then squads may compete to see who can produce the greatest quantity of evidence (since quality of evidence is harder for high school students to measure). This competition may intensify the gap between the haves and the have-nots, as the wealthier squads buy more handbooks, attend more workshops, and hire researchers. While I have reservations about some of these practices, they are very hard to regulate.

The no-flow rule and the ban on evidence reading are examples or well-intended rules that have not lived up to their promise. While I agree with the principles behind these rules (and I rarely look at more than two or three cards per tournament), if the option to look at evidence is not permitted, debaters may tend to distort evidence or to gloss over important issues. Even if the judge is not taking notes, a team confronted with a spread still is faced with an unpleasant choice of spreading or ignoring arguments. In addition, the quality of the critique way decline if a judge does not take accurate notes, and the lack of a flow may promote decisions based on previous biases of the judge (since the judge will tend to forget arguments contrary to his or her previous beliefs).

Some have argued that the increase in theory arguments has caused a decline in the quality of high school debates.[6] I do not think this is the case. While there are bad theory arguments in debate, there are bad substantive arguments also; the problem is not with the arguments, but with the weight given to the argument (although, as I will indicate in a minute, I do think that there are some types of tournaments where theory should be debated). Even before theory was debated there were problems with the quality of debate as judges applied obscure standards to debates. I remember judges who would base their entire decision on a single card, read in one speech and never mentioned again. The hypothetical counterplan of today was the justification argument (or, in some cases, the "minor repair") of yesterday.

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5. McBath, pp. 18-19.

6. See Walter Ulrich, "Debate as Dialectic: A Defense of the Tabula Rasa Approach to Judging," Journal of the American Forensic Association, 21 (Fall, 1984), 89-93.

What constituted "inherency" varied from judge to judge, with debaters often being unaware of the views of their judge on the issue. Other judges would impose strange views of debate on unsuspecting debaters. Those who argue against theoretical positions might argue things would be better if there was one dominant theory imposed on all debates, but the assumption is that the theory being imposed was their own. I'm not sure if we would like seeing hypothesis testing imposed on all debates, for example. The point is that there is no agreement on many issues (for example, counterplan fiat, the nature of topicality arguments, etc.) To impose one system on all debates would alienate many members of the debate community.

In addition, there are mechanical problems for imposing standards on debate. Untrained judges may not know about the standard that should be imposed, so they may unintentionaly impose standards inconsistent with those of the community. While this may be minimized through the education of judges with pamphlets, etc., this process would decrease the number of potential judges, especially if the rules were very complex (and if the rules were simple, there would be ambiguity in their interpritation, and they might be inadequate for resolving new theoretical developments).

Similarly, it is often easy to attack judges for the problems of debate. I think we tend to overemphasize the influence of the debate judge on the activity.[7] Debaters come into contact with any individual judge only occasionally. The feedback debaters receive from a judge is usually quite brief. Claims that a judge can alter the nature of debate may also be overstated. Much of the judge's feedback comes after the round, when it is too late for the debaters to adjust their style. In addition, I am not sure if debaters are able to accurately understand why many judges vote the way they do. For example, a judge that spends much time weighing the quality of evidence may be unable to explain to the debaters, card for card, why a debate was resolved in a certain way. Debaters may then look for simpler ways to explain the judge's reaction. I am reminded of the theories some of the debaters create concerning how to be "successful": carry around lots of blank notecards (or old evidence) to make others think you have a lot of evidence on the topic; sit facing the judge; wear the "right" type of clothes. If the judge is to play an important role in establishing the quality of debate, then the

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7. See Walter Ulrich, "The Influence of the Judge on the Debate Round," in Argument in Transition: Proceedings of the Third Summer Conference on Argumentation, David Zarefsky, Malcolm O. Sillars and Jack Rhodes, eds. (Annandale, Va.: Speech Communication Association, October 15, 1983), pp. 938-950.

judge should be given greater discretion to alter behavior of the debaters.

Part of the current problems with the quality of current debate may lie with the coaches, (including the college coaches at high school workshops). Debaters often do not weigh evidence correctly or communicate clearly because coaches do not train debaters in how to evaluate evidence, how to handle the spread without becoming incomprehensible[8] or how to respond to unusual arguments. I do not believe, for example, that teams need to be rapid to win, but it requires effort to train our debaters how to select arguments and explain positions in order to respond to these positions. Similarly, the response to weak arguments (and I would include many of the counterplans such as anarchy, socialism, and world government in this category) is not to complain in coaches meetings about the problems with these positions, but rather it is to talk with our debaters about the weaknesses of these positions so that they can beat these arguments. The way to weed out bad practices is to utilize the marketplace of ideas to promote strong responses to these positions. We need to train our debaters how to respond to these positions so, if faced with similar arguments in the real world, they will be prepared to locate the problems with the arguments.

It may be wise for high schools to learn from the lessons of colleges. Colleges have faced similar problems concerning the problem of delivery. The creation of CEDA debate was partly in response to many of the problems of debate that are being talked about at this conference. While the organization initially had some success in altering the behavior of debaters, most would not agree that it is rapidly developing into a type of debate similar to traditional debate.[9] I have heard many judges come out of CEDA rounds commenting that the debate was just like a traditional debate. At best, individuals will compare CEDA debate with traditional debate in the 1970's. The reason for this is that, while a new organization can create short-term changes, unless the incentive structure is altered, the same problems will exist. Time pressures and the need to cover arguments will force debaters to speed up their delivery, especially when the opposing team speeds up and they are unsure how the judge will react if they ignore an argument. The pressure to win will encourage increasing research efforts and unusual strategies. Unless the cause of the problem is minimized, the problem will continue.

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8. See Walter Ulrich, "On the Stategic Utility of the Spread," Debate Issues, 17 (January, 1984), 3-11.

9. Jim Brooks, "Current Problems in College Debate," Debate Issues, 17 (November, 1983), 11-15.

Suggestions for the Future

It is easy to identify problems with forensics, and relatively easy to point a finger at potential causes of these problems. Developing concrete solutions is a much more difficult task. While this conference can take some actions to help address the problems with high school debate, it is important to recognize that these actions will need follow through, either by the organizations represented at this conference, or by individual coaches and judges, making a series of decisions that effect debate. In the end, the success or failure of this conference will be determined in the trenches, as suggestions are put into operation. The Sedalia conference made several idealistic statements of what a judge or a coach should do; in reality many of these suggestions had only a limited effect on tournament behavior. This conference can take two types of actions that can influence debate. First, it can produce some documents (like statements on ethics, the goals of forensics, etc.) that can help establish norms for the community without any additional action by others. Second, it can develop ideas, together with support for those ideas, that can be taken to other organizations in the hope that they will take some action. The second type of suggestions will require follow-up by members of this conference. I have already suggested some potential steps for the improvement of high school debate in my discussion of the causes of the current problems. I would now like to address two additional suggestions that I think this conference could help place into motion.

Lowering the Entry Barriers. As I mentioned earlier, part of the reason for the decline in participation has been the high entry barriers to competition. It is unreasonable to expect beginning (or even intermediate) debaters to be familiar with all the theoretical and policy implications of a topic. While I think that there is some justification for debate over theoretical positions, for example, I don't think that novice debaters benefit from this type of argument. I would suggest that this conference develop a classification of tournaments[10] that can be used by various tournaments across the country. For example, a classification scheme might include three levels of competition:

> Level A: Novice Competition: Restricted to debaters with less than one year experience. Cases will be restricted to those outlined by the NFL, published in

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10. Walter Ulrich, "Diversity in Debate Tournaments," Rostrum, 15 (March, 1982), 3-6.

the September Rostrum. Counterplans and theory arguments will be prohibited. The NFL may also wish to stipulate that certain assumptions (e.g., growth is good) will be operative in all debates. The stock issues paradigm would be used by all judges. Topicality will be a voting issue, and the judge will determine after 1AC if the case is topical. (It might also be possible to limit the evidence used to that from certain handbooks, or that from a combination of a bibliography and a set of indexes/magazines)

Level B: Similar to the above, but with no restrictions on experience or cases. Topicality will be argued in the round, and counterplans restricted to topic-specific counterplans.

Level C: Essentially, the current restrictions: no restrictions on cases, negative arguments, or theoretical arguments.

Obviously these details may need to be modified; levels may be added and the characteristics of each level might need to be modified. Some areas of the country (the Pacific Northwest, for example) have already adopted a part of this proposal by developing novice case lists. Under this proposal, the restrictions might go beyond the mere listing of cases.

Individual tournaments will decide which level they will support at their tournament. Level A and B tournaments (or divisions) will permit debaters to gradually develop basic skills before being forced to address more esoteric arguments. A similar system is used in bridge tournaments; beginning players are not expected to know all the advanced bidding systems when they begin tournament competition; as they gain experience more complicated strategies are permitted. While I think there is value to debating the benefits and harms of growth, for example, these are complex issues that may be too difficult for a beginning debater to grasp. As the year progresses, however, debaters can gradually expand their knowledge of the issues being debated.

Level A tournaments may require detailed rules of conduct, including perhaps the publication of both an introductory set of "rules of debate" and brief standardized judging instructions. Should tournament directors wish, these could be modified or abandoned (for a level C tournament). These guidelines would allow for some uniformity in preparing debaters for novice tournaments.

In addition, one way to increase the number of participants might be to encourage novice tournaments judged by varsity

debaters. Not only does this enable the novices to get experience, but it also enables the varsity debaters to gain the opportunity of seeing what a debate looks like from the perspective of a judge.

Increased Judge Intervention. Judges are often faced with a situation where a debate team will engage in an objectional behavior that does not warrant a loss or which, for some reason, the judge cannot award a loss. For example, when one team spreads and the other is forced to respond in kind, uncertain about how the judge will react. One solution to this problem might be to alter the rules of debate in order for a judge to alter the debate during the debate. If a team is incomprehensible, for example, a judge could be permitted to orally tell the debater to slow down. If the debater continues, the judge would be permitted to deduct increments of, say, 15 seconds from the speaker's allocated time for each violation.[11] This rule would permit judges to provide direct feedback to a team, and it would permit penalizing one team that speaks incomprehensibly without placing the other team in a position of having to guess which arguments to cover or whether to counter a spread with a spread. In addition, if a team introduces an unclear or poorly developed argument, the judge might be ably to request further development of these positions during the round, rather than making both teams guess what issues need to be covered.

While this rule might have to be implimented by individual coaches, this conference might consider endorsing such a proposal, any may help create a standard format of the rule so tournaments can choose to utilize the rule, if they think it desirable. The actual implementation will, of course, be up to the individual judge.

Both of these suggestions have the advantage of being low-risk proposals. If they turn out to be ineffective, they can be ignored easily, (the first by classifying all tournaments as C level, the second if judges ignore the rule), but I think they both have the potential of producing significant improvements in the quality of debate. By not imposing rules on individuals, neither rule is likely to create hostility; both will leave the implimentation of the policy to the individual tournament director and judge.

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11. See Walter Ulrich, "Eliminating the Abuses of CEDA Debate: The Debate Judge as a Referee," submitted to CEDA Yearbook, 1985.

Conclusion

This paper, as well as many at this conference, may have been overly pessimistic.[12] It is worth noting that, whatever the weaknesses of current debate practices, academic debate still is an extremely valuable activity. Thousands of individuals receive an excellent education by participating in debate. In talking with debaters across the nation, I am convinced that, regardless of what conclusions one may reach byy observing a debate, debaters do understand much about the topic. Debaters have learned much about current events and current issues. They can discuss these issues intelligently outside the debate round. Having heard debaters give presentations outside of debate rounds, it is clear that the majority of the debaters can adapt to different rhetorical situations and can (occasionally after a short transition) be very effective speakers. In addition, the historical evidence is clear that the debaters of today will be the leaders of tomorrow. I see a high percentage of former high school debaters that I have worked with attending prestigious universities. I know of former debaters editing law journals at Harvard, Yale, Texas, Michigan, and a host of other high quality institutions. In short, while there is much to do to make debate an even better activity, it is important to recognize that, even without changes, debate is still an outstanding activity. At the same time, we should focus our energies on making sure that high school debate does not deteriorate either in size or in quality, and we should do everything we can do to make an excellent activity even better.

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12. See Blair Lybbert, "The Debate Over Debate: Another Perspective," Debate Issues, 17 (October, 1983), 3-9.

Appendix
Sample Rules for Judge-Imposed Penalties

Individual judges are authorized to penalize teams violating commonly accepted norms of proper debate behavior by deducting time from the speeches of the individual speaker violating these norms:

A. Mechanics. If a judge thinks that a debater is engaged in unacceptable behavior, the judge should give the debater an oral warning. If the individual's behavior continues, the judge may deduct 15 seconds from the allocated speaking time of the violator for each additional violation, informing the violator orally about each subsequent violation.

B. Nature of Violations. Violations that may justify the imposition of a penalty include, but are not limited to:

1. Incomprehensible delivery

2. Excessively rapid delivery

3. Talking out of turn (for example, during a partner's cross-examination period)

4. Rudeness

C. Non-Penalty Warnings. A judge is encouraged to inform a speaker orally if an argument is insufficiently developed and/or explained. The failure of a judge to indicate that an argument is not clear, however does not guarantee that the argument has been adequately developed.

D. Pre-round warnings. Judges are encouraged to talk with debaters prior to the round outlining the standards for delivery and minimum standards for arguments that will be imposed during the round.

E. Multiple-Judge Panels. If there is more than one judge evaluating a debate, any individual judge can impose this penalty.

F. (Optional) Requests for Responses. Debaters may not ask the opposing team for responses to arguments, except during the cross-examination period or after the debate. If a response is unclear, the debaters on the opposing team should ask the judge for the response (if the judge is taking a flow). If the judge cannot explain the argument, then that argument should be disregarded by the judge and all participants.